

THE CONCEPT OF SELF/OTHER IN - *IN THE SKIN OF A LION*

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ABSTRACT

Philip Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer. As an emigre to Canada through England, he depicts the trauma faced by him at home and in exile. Winner of many awards and accolades like Man Booker prize, Governor General Award, Kiriyama Award, he has numerous poetic collections and seven novels to his credit. He is a diasporic writer and a poet. His novels have humour, rhythm and are written in lucid poetic prose. The SriLankan government honoured him with SriLanka Ratna award by the former president Chandrika Kumara Tunga which is the most prestigious award bestowed to a writer. His novel *The English Patient* (1982) won him man booker prize award and the film version won him nine Oscars.

The novel, *The Skin of a Lion* (1987) depicts the trauma of alienation faced by the immigrants. The novel records the construction of the migrant land Canada. The novel won order of Canada award. The novel has a subtitle 'Novel'. He depicts the picture of the construction of his adopted land Canada being an emigrant. He picturises the multicultural perspectives through immigrants from various nationalities. They were the Bulgarians, Macedonians, Finnish and Eurasians. These immigrants and the story of the construction of major areas of Toronto and their trauma is not recorded in official history. Ondaatje commemorates their wonderful service by digging up the forgotten official history. The author has conducted wide research in archives. Photographs and few official records help him to construct a novel.

KEYWORDS: Philip Michael Ondaatje, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Finnish and Eurasians

INTRODUCTION

Ondaatje portrays the angst of dislocation faced by Patrick Lewis who lives in a sylvan Hamlet called Depot Creek in Ontario. His father, a dynamic, meticulous dynamiter works in feldspar mines. Due to sudden unexpected explosion Hazen Lewis dies in the mines leaving Patrick an orphan. In Depot Creek, he is setback by seeing a group of loggers who immigrated to his native place. They came with their cuttails and were strong men."It was an epiphany" (ISL 21). Patrick did not realise then that these strangers will have great influence in his life later. The novel is a bildungsroman which traces the growth of Patrick from childhood to manhood and the novel can be rightly called young adult fiction.

The main focus of the novel is the picture of Toronto in 1940 and the construction of RC water treatment plant and Bloor Street via duct by the immigrants who remained obscure. Jacques Derrida's binary oppositions of self/other and coloniser/ colonised is brilliantly focussed to make the novel post colonial. Canada is a bicultural country dominated by two cultures one English and the other French. After the announcement of the immigration Act in 1988 by prime minister Trudeau Canada became multicultural which encouraged immigrants from all over the world. Many true

facts like the fall of the nun from the bridge, Nicholas the dare devil Macedonian's adventure and the search for the missing millionaire Ambrose Small. The immigrants language acquisition of the immigrant land and cultural adjustment is vividly brought out in the novel.

Patrick as an immigrant to the city of Toronto felt a stranger in his own land. Though English speaking from Anglo Irish roots, the well constructed city was so different he felt like being in the belly of a whale. In the busy city the culture was different it was a mixed crowd of immigrants from Asia, central European countries like Macedonia, Bulgaria, Spanish, French and the Dutch.

Patrick Lewis arrived in the city of Toronto as if it were land after years at sea. Growing up in a country had governed his childhood: the small village of Bellrock, the highway of the river down which loggers came, drinking, working raucous and in the spring leaving the inhabitants shocked with silence. .. He was an immigrant to the city. (ISL 55)

The city was controlled by the elite capitalists who suppressed the immigrants worked as construction workers of the big bridge called Bloor Street via Duct; the tunnel which leads to the RC water treatment plant tanneries and dyeing factories. Commissioner Harris was a representative of the capitalists. They were paid very poor and were paid poor wages. Worst was they had to work under unhygienic working conditions. They had to eat under the stench of polluted air. They boarded in a cramped room. The workers were depressed mentally for they lacked freedom. They were compelled to speak in English failing which they were jailed. The tannery workers had the foul odour from the skin of animals and they carried the stench which got to their bodies. To improve English the workers went for movies and heard English numbers.

Patrick began his career in search of a last millionaire called Ambrose Small. There was a job for the jobless immigrants to search for the lost persons for they were rewarded with huge ransom by the government. During his search he befriends Clara Dickens, Small's wife and her friend Alice who lives with her daughter Hana. Both are actress and Alice was a Pantomime actress. Patrick falls in love with Clara. Life becomes different and becomes meaningful with them for Patrick befriends the co-workers and the fellow immigrants who were traumatised like him.

Patrick meets the workers in the Pantomime show conducted by the workers in the backyard of the RC water treatment plant on Sunday. The puppets gagged their mouth to show that they were marginalised and ostracized by the capitalists being devoid of speech, were compelled to speak only in English, unhygienic work conditions and poor wages. Patrick being a silent watcher outbursts his emotion when the puppet bangs her hand with a loud cry. He becomes a revolutionary. The puppet is Alice Gull.

The narrative shifts from private lives to national history. The construction of Bloor street viaduct shows the struggle that exists between culture and tradition. This is an important place in the city which connects eastern Toronto with its centre providing water, transport and electricity. The bridge in Toronto was under construction and was unfinished. It so happened one day that five nuns crossed the unfinished bridge ignorant of the impending danger. Perhaps the bus had dropped them near the bridge. Harris, the commissioner had come there to witness the progress of the bridge. One of the nuns fell down as the sudden gust of wind blows over her. As Harris watches in mute horror, a gust of wind lifts one of these women off her feet and flings her headlong into the vacant air.

A Macedonian immigrant by name Nicholas Tamelcof saves her miraculously. He jumps from the bridge and catches the falling Nun before she falls into the river. His one arm was fractured in the attempt. He treats her giving first

aid and refreshment in a nearby restaurant called, The Ohrida Restaurant. The nun transforms herself into an ordinary woman; naming herself as Alice she disappears from there. She transforms herself from a religious nun into an ordinary woman, later an actress marrying Cato, a Finnish immigrant and a political activist. This miraculous incident would be remembered by both Nicholas and the nun. This helps them find their identity. “In the eyes of Commissioner Harris the viaduct serves as the power of capital to transcend the world of lived social relations. The bridge translates its human material into a monument of pure civic prestige” (Spinks 145). Ondaatje observes the division between capitalists and their exploitation of laborers. Because of the capitalists vision many people were able to get jobs and the city was a well planned and modern city. Nicholas Tamelcof who was once a builder now owns a bakery and makes use of the bridge he once constructed to transport his bakery products.

Commissioner Harris who is the representative of the capitalists, whose dream project was the RC water treatment plant and the mammoth bridge called Bloor street Via Duct. Cato, a logger and Alice's husband is the leader of the labour union Alice Gull and Hana are left lonely after the murder of the Cato. Patrick now realises that once the loggers whom he had seen as a little boy are now the fellow Finnish immigrant labourers. Alice in order to wreak vengeance on the capitalists creates an awareness to the workers to the pantomime show. The labourers get awareness. Patrick now becomes one with them, laughs and cries with them. He wishes to save his friends from suffering.

He joins Alice and both plan to blast the Hotel. Alice picks up a bag of explosives mistakenly and is killed. Death of Alice triggers violence in the heart of Patrick and tries to blast the hotel. He is caught and imprisoned. Befriended by Caravaggio, a thief who steals for pleasure he escapes. Caravaggio helps Patrick to reach the RC water treatment plant to flow up the dream and shatter all his wishes. He swims and when he reaches the spot blacks out. Surprisingly, he has a verbal duel with commissioner Harris and says: “You killed hundreds of us”(ISL 114). and Harris says there is no record kept and Alice was killed by an Anarchist. Harris, convinces Patrick saying his mother was a caretaker and he worked up. One of the postmodern themes is the character’s quest for identity. His focus is on the marginalized immigrant from various places who are struggling to build a new life for themselves.

Patrick, the displaced individual moves through a network of many cultures in which cultural difference between Canadian and foreigners are seen in terms of labourers and the rich. Ondaatje concentrates less on the people like the officials, city planners and commissioners who are recorded in official history. He concentrates more on the poor and the marginalized who built the city. He revises the civic history. The official history actually exists. Ondaatje uses the materials recorded from the past and uses it in his fiction as evidence. He records the unofficial history of a small community in Toronto. It was a city full of linguistic and cultural diversity. His identity develops with Greek, Macedonian, Russian and Italian immigrants. “Ondaatje’s exploitation of the working class experience challenges notions of Canadian identity as a racially neutral society in which a multicultural society is built” (Lowry 66).

The novel focuses on the trauma of the immigrants. An act of metamorphosis and adaptability to new milieu and culture takes place after overcoming many hurdles. The expansion of Toronto city by the immigrant labourers is one of the postmodern and postcolonial concepts of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is one of the thrust areas of the novel where the migrants form a confluence of varied cultures from different nations settled in the new land. Canada is a land of immigrants. Toronto is focused in the novel as a major area of class struggle. “When Patrick enters the city it is a city of linguistic and cultural diversity. Canada was a place ruled by Franco-Anglo bicultural or Anglo imperialism” (Seimerling 97).

The unhygienic working conditions of the tunnel workers unravel the miserable plight of the immigrant workers. They worked in dark tunnel below Lake Ontario and many became a prey to the dangerous waves. The physical labour created pain in their body and the difficulty of banging the walls of the caves is excruciating. There was no possibility of taking any rest. "Each blow against the shale walls jars from the palms into the shoulders as if the body is hit" (ISL 105). Along with the unhygienic conditions they have to put up with their low salaries. They do not communicate with each other as they come from various linguistic backgrounds. As they remain silent they are compared to the beasts of burden. "The brain of a mule is no more and no less knowledgeable than the body of a man who dug into a clay wall in front of him" (ISL 112).

They turn back from work in the dark. Thus the labourers were unrecognized and marginalized. They ate what they had to urinate. They spoke through gestures and non-verbal communication as they did not know the language. These immigrants learned the language by imitating the actors and actresses. Patrick came home late to his small dwelling and exhausted goes to feed the Iguana. Next morning at six o'clock without washing the clothes takes the unwashed clothes, eats breakfast for ten minutes and leaves for work. "Michael Foucault points out the Marxist ideals of how the capitalists make use of the cheap labours and exploit the marginalized. They become slave to the tyranny of the clocks" (qtd in Wojciech n.p.).

Patrick had to work later in a tanning factory where the hides of animals were mixed with dye. The workers were tarred with the colour and only little water and less time was given for them to bathe. The smell was so foul that Alice was afraid that they might catch some contagious disease like pneumonia and die. The actresses in the pantomime show passed the skins of animals with pelts of animal in them. Each character narrates the problems by wearing the skins of animals. Skin is a symbol of identity.

But they must turn and kill the animals in slaughter houses. And the smell of the tanning factory goes into their noses and lungs and stays there for life. It brutalizes. It's like sleeping with the enemy. It clung to Hana's father. They get burns from the galvanizing process. Arthritis, rheumatism. That's the truth. (ISL 130)

The shift system invaded their private lives. Most of them were young and longed for freedom. They not only suffered physically but also psychologically. This leads to frustrations and depressions as enacted in the puppet show where Alice acting as a puppet bangs the floor with a thud and a loud scream. The silent suffering of the voiceless people because of the tyranny of the capitalists and their outbreak of suppressed emotions triggers rebellion in the hearts of the workers.

Karl Marx a German philosopher discusses the conflict that existed between the Capitalists and the labour. Marxism demands equal wages, Justice and equality among the masses. Commissioner Harris Tweed Coat was twice their salary and the tiled houses were very expensive. Patrick argues that the capitalists thrive at the extraction of work from the immigrant labourers.

CONCLUSIONS

Gayathri Chakravarthy Spivak in her, *Can the Subaltern Speak* deems these labourers as oppressed poor people. They are marginalised. The term 'other' is shown to be relational to the minority. The concept of 'self' refers to the elite capitalists and 'other' to the marginalized immigrant workers is the major focus of the novel. Edward Said in his book Orientalism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her critical work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* discusses the concept of the

'self' and the 'other' that exists between the capitalists and the labourers and between the colonizer and the colonized. Ondaatje has to prove to the world that his immigrant land was constructed by the blood and sweat of the immigrants.

The trauma of immigration and dislocation is faced by the author who is himself an immigrant to the land. Derrida's binary opposition of the past and the present, Capitalist vs. Labour, margins/centre is highlighted in the novel. Homi. K. Bhaba calls the people who imitate the colonizer's language, to be the 'mimetic men'. The workers mimic the colonizers language by attending pantomime show, listening to music and going to cinemas.

The novel can be called a postmodern and postcolonial novel with intertextual references and quotes from many sources like John Berger's Epigraph, epic of Gilgamesh, epigraphs and photographs. The novel can be called a historiographic metafiction where it records the unofficial immigrant history. The novel has a non-linear circular motion where the adopted father of Hana, Alice's daughter narrates the story while driving to Marmoura and back. Ondaatje's language is poetical prose with italicised pages. Beauty of nature is brilliantly caricatured. The binary oppositions of various postcolonial theorists like Jacques Derrida like centre/ margin, self/other, Said's orient/occident, Foucault and Spivak's cause of the subaltern is underpinned through the trauma of the immigrants who make a complex multicultural background of Canadian history.

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